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Kraus' Brahms conquers Pollack Hall

Johannes Brahms was inordinately fond of the variation form. Not only did he compose five major sets of variations for piano solo and one for two pianos (which he also transcribed for orchestra) but he used the variation form for the finale of his last symphony.

Variations were a challenge to him. Beethoven had seemingly exhausted the form with his innumerable essays into the form — for piano, chamber groups and orchestra — and he had to find new ways to exploit an old medium.

He did, with enormous success.

Just how successful was made apparent on Friday evening when Detlef Kraus played all five sets of variations for piano solo on one program. It was an endurance test for the pianist and for his audience as well.

All of these were comparatively early works, and as a result all are strongly virtuoso in character. It takes a pianist with more than ordinary endurance and a greater than usual sense of pace just to ber able to get through the vast number of notes.

Fatigue

This Kraus did, though there were times, towards the end of the program, when even he was showing signs of fatigue.

But clearly this was more than an endurance test. There was a point to all of this music making.

The earliest of the sets of variations was the Op 9 on a Theme by Schumann and here one could see the young Brahms attempting to imitate Schumann and doing so with extraordinary sensitivity.

The two sets of variations Op. 21 are both far more individual — if not original — and both show how cleverly Brahms developed his own and folk material.

The two remaining series, the Op. 24, on a Theme by Handel, and the Op. 35 on a Theme by Paganini, find Brahms his own master. There are no echoes of other composers or familiar devices here. Both are completely original, musically and pianistically.

Most difficult

Indeed, until the turn of the century both the Op. 24 and the Op. 35 were considered the most difficult piano works ever composed.

Interestingly, Kraus refused to make this an occasion for technical display. He chose to accent the purely musical values of these scores and make light of the technical problems, and he did so with great skill and considerable imagination.

I have heard others play some of these variations with greater sensitivity, but I have never heard another pianist play them all with equal distinction.

Solution

Kraus very nearly had three strikes against him before he began his performance. He was playing in the new Maurice Pollack Concert Hall at the McGill Faculty of Music, an auditorium notorious for its long period of reverberation and the deleterious effect it has on piano sound.

But Kraus is obviously an experienced concert artist and he had the measure of the hall before he began to play. His solution was extraordinarily simple — he kept down the volume of the left hand, playing very softly in those passages that reached farthest into the bass, and thereby succeeded in preventing the sound from muddying beyond recognition.

This deprived the music of some of its drama but it also enabled the audience to hear the music without pain.

Will future recitalists in the hall please note?

Under the circumstances it was a pleasure to hear such warm piano playing come through with such clarity and urgency. Now, can we hear Kraus again under more favorable circumstances — soon?

Ron Wood and Rod Stewart: Warm electricity

Stewart shows true rock feel

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

The Rod Stewart and Faces show at the Forum on Friday night demonstrated that there is at least one superstar group able to convey genuine feeling for — and enjoyment in playing — rock 'n' roll. They move, raggedy-limbed, the way their music told them to move.

Their natural reactions provided relief from what is becoming the norm in rock shows. The postuering stars who choreograph themselves to an image, the band that turns up the amps and methodically pounds one into oblivion, or the tremulous harmony singers so intent on cleanliness and "perfection" that they seem at distance from reality.

Good humor mystique

Stewart and cohorts are rockers through and through. Rod pranced out in a striped silk quasi-karate utfit while the Faces were decked out in a multi-colored assortment of blouses, scarves and jeans — all very comfortable and relaxed. The only mystique about this band is its good humor.

It starts from the rheumy parched vocals of the 30-year-old Stewart, who has the same kind of feeling for American soul and folk music that he had a decade ago when he was a part of the British rock-blues movement that spawned the Rolling Stones, Cream, Jeff Beck, et al.

Whereas Mick Jagger is a more dramatic vocalist, Stewart's intensity is warmer. He belts out the songs as if they wer everything at that moment. The message is irresistably simple: Tell tales of love and woe, but keep it rocking!

His musicians performed in a deceptively "loose" manner that can only be pulled off by maximum communication among themselves.

Lead guitarist Ron Wood has returned to the Faces from his stint on the recent Rolling Stones tour of America, and he was in an obviously mellow mood (Faces music doesn't have to live up to the Demon). "Woody" can burn and sting along with other guitar flashes, but his style is subtle and resourceful, without the archness of the rock guitar solo syndrome.

Guesting rhythm guitarist Jesse Ed Davis (a Los Angeles session veteran) added his own inventive supporting riffs. Drummer Kenny Jones is a great basher and bassist Tesu Yaumachi (the newest Face, who joined from Japan two years ago) offered the booming elastic bottom to the band's sound. Ian McLagen boogied on grand piano and soared soulfully on Hammond organ.

Souped-up tribute

They rocked and rolled for over a hundred minutes. A string section entered the fray for a few numbers, adding elegy to a stirring rendition of the late Sam Cooke's Send Me. The familiar souped-up tribute to Motown, via (I Know) I'm Loosing You, was unflagging. The group's own material, such as You Wear it Well and new songs from the Trans-Atlantic Crossing album, kept pace with the songs of their rock 'n' soul heroes.

The magic was there, spontaneous within the tour grind, because they showed they loved to play rock 'n' roll. The roots were always evident, allowing for a free-wheeling romp and making this show one of the most enjoyable of the year.

Tim Weisberg

Multi-talented jazzman fresh

By NIGHTHAWK
for The Gazette

The quintet of Tim Weisberg gave a concert at the Outremont Cinema last Saturday night, and the evening turned out to be an especially pleasant experience from many points of view.

Weisberg who plays C-concert, alto and bass flutes performed music that is blessedly hard to categorize. It includes styles from the western European classics, rhythm and blues, jazz, rock and pop. The diversity is welcome.

His blending of all these idioms is delivered with assurance, perfect control and tangible warmth. His stage presence is relaxed and endearing.

The orchestrations of simple tunes are rather intricate, with precise breaks, well worked out, and the quintet sounds clean and tight under the undeniable leadership of Weisberg.

Lynn Blessing does a good job on keyboards, synthetizers and vibes. Todd Robinson plays a gutsy six and 12-string guitar with a strong country and western coloring. Bugsey Anderson holds a steady bass line and Ty Grimes rocks the drums.

One of the most intriguing things about Weisberg's group is the scope of the music it performs and its melodic qualities. These two elements have, so far, been noticeably absent from the rock scene.

If this is an indication of where some of the rock is going, alleluiah, there is hope for young music lovers.

It was obvious that the audience was listening intently and enjoying the experience of a music that travelled far beyond a few chords and a steady beat.

HIGH VOLUME

The volume still suffered from the contemporary malaise of being too high, but that's a minor criticism.

Improvisation is another problem, and in that area the quintet falls a little short as most of their musical explorations are limited to basic scale runs and arpeggios, although these are tastefully arranged.

During a segment of chorus-swapping between Weisberg and the drummer, Grimes was not only uninspired but also managed to stay consistently behind the beat. An obvious reminder of the intricacies of improvisation which too many musicians and fans alike seem to take for granted. "Instant composing," as it has been called by jazz musicians, is full of pitfalls.

On the positive side of that delicate subject of improvisation, all the musicians deserve credit for avoiding the overlong meanderings which usually plague green improvisers.

Weisberg's music is composed in cooperation by all the members of the group, and exhibits a multi-colored spectrum of emotions from the intense to the peaceful.

TEXTURE

It is not new, nor is it revolutionary, but it is evolutionary and musically maturing to a viable texture. It has a fresh immediacy, and most of all a strong sense of enjoyment shared by both the quintet and the audience.

Weisberg has recorded five albums which have all met with success. His latest venture, recently released, is called Listen to The City.

Chamber quartet a delight in unity

By MARGUERITE SENECAL
of The Gazette

Beethoven's spirit was almost tangible yesterday afternoon at the Centaur Theatre where the Classical Quartet of Montreal presented the first of five concerts they will hold there this winter.

Four of the city's finest musicians blended their separate strengths and sensitivities to give their audience an especially enjoyable afternoon of chamber music, performing Beethoven's Op 18 no. 4, Op. 74 and Op. 59 no. 3.

RISK

Last year, Robert Verebes, the quartet's violist and 17-year member of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, assumed the financial risk of the newly formed quartet. This year, automobile dealers Toyota Spinelli have relieved most of the burden.

Arthur Garami, the MSO's assistant concert master, is the quartet's first violinist. Claire Segal, second violin, has been with the symphony for six years. Ifan Williams, freelance cellist from the Maritimes, completes the group.

The entire performance exuded professionalism with each musician intimately attuned to the movements of the others. That special blend of individuality and unity which makes for good chamber music was achieved through careful concentration on timing and dynamics.

Either by chance or choice, the program reflected the moody melancholia and crisp autumn spirit of late October in Montreal. The poco adagio of op. 74 flowed as smoothly as a conversation between sympathetic friends and Garami's leading notes in the Adagio ma non troppo captured the last song of a dying summer.

William's cello was beautifully warm and politely unobtrusive — but when it took the lead, it sent out the deep, gutsy base so characteristic of Beethoven. Segal's spirited precision and careful discipline was beautiful to both eye and ear.

The audience concentrated almost as deeply as the musicians and no doubt are looking forward to a winter of intimate meetings with this gifted group.

Johnny Mercer still in a coma

PASADENA, Calif. — (AP) — Songwriter Johnny Mercer, who underwent brain surgery last week, remained in a coma at Huntington Memorial Hospital yesterday.

A hospital spokesman said Mercer, 66, was "slightly improved but still in precarious condition."

A tumor was removed from the composer's brain Thursday but there was no word yet whether it was malignant, the spokesman said.

British rockers dazzling in music and versatility

By DOUG PRINGLE
for The Gazette

Last night at the Centre Sportif of the University of Montreal, British band 10 c.c. provided a dazzling display of musicianship and versatility.

Although relatively new to Canadian audiences the individual group members have been heavy contributers to the British music scene since the mid 60s. Bass player Graham Gouldman was responsible for writing many hits for groups like the Yardbirds, Hollies and Hermans Hermits while Eric Stewart was a member of the Mindbenders.

Gouldman and Stewart along with guitarist Lol Creme and drummer Kevin Godley formed a group called Hot Legs who had one large worldwide hit called Neandrathal Man before changing their name to 10 c.c.

BRAINCHILD

The name 10 c.c. is the brainchild of the group's label chief Jonathan King and is roughly the amount of sperm in a male ejaculation.

GRAHAM GOULDMAN
. . . many hits

All their past experience was in full evidence as they concentrated primarily on material from their albums Sheet Music and Original Soundtrack. The group added another drummer on stage which in turn freed Godley to come up front and handle lead vocals on various songs.

Apart from being superb musicians, all four are also excellent vocalists giving the group a potential most don't possess.

Well aware of this, they cover a range of musical styles that is quite astonishing. Everything is done with impeccable taste and economy and it is good to hear a rock group pay so much attention to the subtlety of the music.

WITTIEST

Add to this the fact that 10 c.c. write the wittiest lyrics in rock music today and you have the complete concert.

If there was a complaint to be made it may be the one voiced by Bobby Boulanger that it was all a little too perfect and sounded exactly like their records.

It's true they are perfectionists in everything they do but there is enough wit and humour to make it all work.

Unfortunately much of the witty repartee between numbers seemed to go over the heads of most of the audience.

However, 10 c.c. are the stuff supergroups are made of. They showed that they have no limitations and if they don't acknowledge any boundaries, the sky is the limit.

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